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Asmara, ERITREA

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Chapter 4

A VERY PERSONAL WAR:

ERITREA ETHIOPIA 1998-2000

Alexander Last

I arrived in Eritrea's capital in February 1998, a month before my twenty-third birthday, to be the "stringer" (or freelance correspondent) for Reuters News Agency and the BBC. I was to live in the capital Asmara, a compact city with a population of about three hundred thousand. Perched on a mountainous plateau, two thousand metres above sea level, Asmara looked like a modern but pretty Italian town. Built during the days of Italian colonialism, it was famed for its stunning art deco buildings built in the twenties and thirties, for its wide boulevards where Eritreans still did the "passeggiata" in the evening, and for its coffee which was steamed through old-fashioned Italian espresso machines.

Eritrea had a wonderful if slightly dull reputation. The government was born out of the remarkable liberation movement that won independence from Ethiopia after a thirty-year war. The Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front or EPLF had defeated the vastly superior Ethiopian armies, first of Haile Selassie backed by the United States, then of Mengistu backed by the Soviet Union. From the end of the liberation war in 1991, the EPLF had become the new Eritrean government, espousing socialist values, female equality and secular government to maintain the balance in a country split equally between Christians and Muslims. There was a theoretical policy of self-reliance, to avoid becoming yet another African country racked by foreign debt. Corruption was not to be tolerated, and democracy would come in time. In the seven years since the end of the war of independence, there had been rapid development, but there were also some grumbings as to the way the old fighters were running the country. Still, all seemed relatively promising. There had been a dispute with Yemen over some islands in the Red Sea, but

that was going through international arbitration. There were problems with Sudan, with whom Eritrea shared its western border. Relations which had once been excellent had deteriorated as the government in Khartoum became supportive of fundamentalist Islam. A secret war was being fought by the Eritreans against Islamic militants who were infiltrating the country from across the Sudanese border.

But most importantly, relations with Ethiopia appeared to be very good. As part of its liberation fight, the EPLF had backed an Ethiopian rebel movement, the TPLF, based to the south of Eritrea in Ethiopia's northern province of Tigray. The TPLF with Eritrean help had eventually taken the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa just days after the EPLF had secured their own capital Asmara. Old comrades were now in charge of both their countries. Publicly at least, reconciliation and co-operation was the new policy between Ethiopia and newly independent Eritrea. Everything appeared to be going relatively well, but the two governments tended to conduct their business in secret. And beneath the surface, trouble was slowly brewing.

Bada, south-eastern Eritrea, near the Ethiopian border, May 1998.

The scorching black volcanic rocks stretched out across the desert. Sliding, then ploughing through the sand, the car headed towards a dormant volcano near the town of Bada, in Eritrea's Danakil Depression. Clouds of dust swirled around the car, the fine particles of sand coating everything and everyone sweltering inside.

Sweat, mingled with sand, trickled down my temples and collected in the white sheet I wrapped across my face as a shield from the burning wind. There had been dark clouds during the journey down from the port of Massawa. It even rained during a painful camel trek along the coast as the worst storms in recent memory had hit East Africa. Now the sun was unopposed, the temperature outside was in the mid 40s. The volcano would provide a dream-like break from the heat; in its crater was a cool lake bordered by reeds, with little fish. The crater, filled from the Red Sea by underground channels, was accessible across sand dunes which roasted sandaled feet.

Swinging the car over an irrigation channel our driver and guide, Robel, pointed to a high craggy ridge where a soldier stood silhouetted against the blue sky. "See him, he's Ethiopian" said Robel as everyone craned to see. "There's the Eritrean soldier watching him", continued Robel pointing to another ridge. Too hot to think. Eventually I asked the obvious, "What are they doing there?"

"Oh the Ethiopians came here last July", Robel went on, wrestling the steering wheel as the car went over a boulder, "most people have left Bada - when the Ethiopians came, they took it over; now most people live in Boleli nearby". Silence, in the car, followed but Robel sensing the confusion repeated what we all believed. "Don't worry, we are brothers, the governments will sort it out; it's no problem."

But that day was 6th May, 1998. The same day, several hundred kilometres away, on Eritrea's south-western border with Ethiopia, an incident took place near a village called Badme which was to become the spark for war between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

The path to war.

It was never properly explained what happened on that day near Badme. But we pieced together the Eritrean side of the story. Eritrean villagers and their Tigrayan neighbours who lived in Badme had been under the local administration of the Tigray region of Ethiopia since independence. This had been part of the interim quid pro quo between the Eritrean (EPLF) and Tigrayan (TPLF) liberation movements who now ruled the two countries: during the wars against Addis Ababa, the liberation movements would divide control of areas on a practical basis, with the border to be sorted out at some indefinite time after victory. But in Badme in the late 1990s, the Eritrean residents complained to the government in Asmara that they were being harassed by the Tigrayan authorities who were settling more Ethiopians in Badme. One resident of Badme said he had visited the government in Asmara to complain, but was told to be quiet and to go back home. Still the complaints of harassment, confiscation of livestock, burning of crops kept coming. After the Ethiopian army had occupied Bada in the south-east, and with the introduction of the new Eritrean currency, border problems started to be taken more seriously. On May 6th 1998, the Eritrean army unit in the area was asked to respond to these complaints and meet with the Tigrayan militia to resolve the problems. Such meetings were common ways of resolving disputes in border areas.

As the Eritreans walked towards Badme, they passed new stone markers that had been set up by the Ethiopian administration to mark, in their eyes, the boundary between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The Eritrean soldiers were then confronted by the local militia who ordered the soldiers to disarm, saying that they were now on Ethiopian territory. The soldiers refused, the militia opened fire, and several Eritrean soldiers were killed. One managed to escape, and made it back to the Eritrean army post. Senior officers were amongst the soldiers killed, veterans of the liberation struggle. The regular Eritrean army had by that time been whittled down from 90,000 to 35,000. Those who remained in uniform were close-knit. As a General remarked at the time, to die on the battlefield has honour, but they were killed in cold blood. Retaliation was the order of the day.

The story was not made public. Kofi Annan, the UN secretary general, was due in Asmara on the 9th of May. He arrived, met the President, and left. At the joint press conference nothing was said about any problems between

Eritrea and Ethiopia. At that time, skirmishing had been going on for several days between Ethiopian militia and small Eritrean army units. The Eritrean-Ethiopian border commission was meeting at that time in Addis Ababa. The commission had been set up after the Ethiopian army took over Bada in 1997, the place near the swimming-pool volcano. (As it turns out, this relatively insignificant area was just one of several places in dispute, stretching from the far west down to the southern tip of Eritrea near the port of Assab.) The meeting in Addis as usual was making little progress. After receiving a call from Asmara, the Eritrean delegation left Addis and returned home. Early that week, the Eritrean President, Isaias Afewerki, left for Saudi Arabia. Orders had been given.

Asmara

Decorations hung from lamp-posts, and stretched across the wide boulevards. There were strings of coloured bulbs, set in the images of camels, hearts and the number 7 - for the years since the end of the war of independence. Independence Day itself was only a couple of weeks away on the 24th of May, and the capital, Asmara, was gearing up to celebrate. The previous week, tens of thousands of Eritreans had left the cities, called up for the National Development Campaign. The intention, the government said, was to help with agricultural and development projects, while refreshing the military training of the national service reservists. Those who were called up, around forty thousand in total, had completed rounds one to four of Eritrean national service and had been returned to civilian life.

The development campaign was supposed to last a month. Before they left to report for duty, friends discussed when they would be back. Everyone joked that they would be away longer than a month. Few gave any thought to the military aspect of the programme. As far as everyone was concerned, the main thing would be planting trees, and digging terracing on Eritrea's sharp, dry mountains.

On Wednesday, 12 May, Robel arrived back in Asmara. He was a wiry, swashbuckling Eritrean, with a goatee beard, slightly wild hair and big eyes. He was in his mid-twenties, independent, intelligent and funny. He had grown up behind the lines with the ELPF liberation movement, attending the "Revolutionary School" for war orphans and the children of independence fighters. His whole family were in the EPLF, and he himself became a fighter in his late teens. He survived the war, but as in many families, his father and two brothers had been killed. Since then, Robel had managed to be demobilised and had become a guide for tourists around the country - as long as this did not clash with his other adventures. One of his Eritrean friends called him Vasco de Gama, after the wandering explorer.

He said there was some trouble in western Eritrea. He had been driving Belgian bird-watchers in the area - as it turned out, not far from Badme. He said he had seen Eritrean tanks and truck-loads of troops moving south through the area. I assumed it was a problem with Sudan - with whom Eritrea had very strained relations. No, he said, it's a problem with Ethiopia.

I was given a lift by Robel early on Thursday morning, as he embarked on his errands. We decided to visit the office of Solomon Abraha, a famous travel agent and member of the Eritrean independence movement who had lived in exile in Italy. He was a generous, intelligent, urbane man, whose enthusiasm for Eritrea was infectious. We sat and drank sweet tea, as Italian schoolteachers came in and out to book their holiday home or to organise excursions around the country with Robel. It was about eleven o'clock, when Solomon answered a phone call. He spoke in Tigrinya, but he was getting visibly irritated. He put down the phone, and said that Ethiopian Airlines had cancelled their flight to Asmara: "they say it's a problem with the GPS or something". Of all the airline companies and travel agents in Asmara, none seemed to have a single reason for the sudden end of Ethiopian Airlines flights. Some said weather, some said a homing beacon was broken, some blamed satellite problems overhead. At twelve the few journalists who were in town met at the American bar. A Reuters team was in Asmara doing happy stories about independence; together we decided to pass the information onto the Reuters office in Nairobi. Later that day, Ethiopia put out a statement, accusing Eritrea of having invaded its territory. It gave an ultimatum to Eritrea: leave, or force will be used to return Badme to Ethiopian control.

Badme, May 14, 1998

Towards Badme, the ruts left by tank tracks running parallel to the dirt road were the only evidence of the Eritrean mechanised division which had rolled into the small village on the 12th. The Eritrean army had driven the Ethiopian administration and its militia into Ethiopia - militarily effective but very heavy-handed.

Badme itself was surprisingly small, set amongst the dry scrubland of western Eritrea. An administration building stood on a small rise, exercise books and bits of paper lay strewn around outside, amongst hundreds of spent bullet casings. In the books were columns and lists. One book was full of names and numbers, and as it later turned out after translation, it detailed fines and punishments for mostly farmers for various misdemeanours. There were a few military trucks and pick-ups parked in the town, which seemed very quiet. Eritrean farmers, a priest and some elders had gathered in the shade of the tree. They spoke in grateful terms of the Eritrean army which they considered liberators. In turn they related stories, each detailing an injustice

that they had endured at the hands of the Ethiopian administration. Most of the Ethiopian population had left. The village was concentrated on one main street, with huts and buildings on either side, some residential, some offering dark sweet tea. Just outside town, beyond the administration building, the flat light-brown Badme plain stretched out towards the shadow of mountains some way in the distance.

Asmara again

There was frantic diplomatic activity. A peace plan was put forward by Rwanda and the United States: it called on Eritrea to withdraw from Badme to be followed by arbitration on the border. It seemed there would be some agreement. The proposal was very similar to the one the Eritrean government had put forward once the dispute became public. One sticking point was the status of the Ethiopian militia who would return to Badme in the event of an Eritrean withdrawal. But then late in May it appeared to unravel. Statements issued by the mediators, whilst in Ethiopia, created an impression in Eritrea that sides had been taken. The Eritrean leader was furious. Conflict seemed almost inevitable but everyone thought it would be over very soon. "It'll be over by Christmas", people said - one of many echoes of previous wars that resurfaced during the conflict. Eritrean veterans were called up, a sense of nationalistic excitement swept through the town. Trucks carrying veterans wound their way up from Massawa, cheered along the route. Of course some were more aware of the reality; parents and wives wept saying good bye to their sons, daughters or husbands who now went off to the army.

But no one blamed the government for the situation. One ex-fighter, on the verge of tears as he talked in his car, kept repeating, almost in whisper, "I loved the peace. We've had only seven years now this." But his anger was focused on the Ethiopians: "why", he asked, "did they want to ruin the brief, joyous years of peace?"

Zalambessa, June 3, 1998

We rose early and walked out of the hotel with its faded facade and shuttered windows onto quiet streets. The only people around were women dressed in long blue jackets and headscarves sweeping the streets with palm fronds, driving up clouds of dust which caught the first light of dawn. Other women in groups of two or three clad in white shawls walked home after church. The Landcruiser drove along the boulevards past the run-down art deco government buildings, along tarmac roads, heading south. The first destination was Senafe, an Eritrean town near the border with Ethiopia, 180 km or so by road south of the capital. Beyond Senafe, on the same road lay the twin border towns of Serba on the Eritrean side, and a bit further down a slight slope, lay Zalambessa. And beyond the border, through more mountains,

the road continued to the Ethiopian towns of Adigrat and Tigray's regional capital Mekele.

I had been up to the border before, watching from Serba through binoculars as Ethiopians dug trenches a few hundred metres away on their side of the border. The strange calm days before the fighting started. Trucks rolled up to cart off the grain from the town's silos. The implications were obvious. The Eritrean General in the area went by the nom de guerre of "Wuju" - people said he was a famous soldier during the Liberation war; he had been illiterate, though later I found out he had excelled at mathematics. He was out of uniform when I first saw him, he wore a track-suit and camouflage flip flops. It was he, we were told, who had led the Eritrean forces into Badme. Now he was on Eritrea's southern border. And it was because of his reputation that we had got up that morning. We had heard reports that there had been some shelling in the south. Everyone in Eritrea was trying to guess where the war would start. Wuju's turf was a better bet than most.

A few hours after leaving Asmara we sped over the final ridge of hills and down into the valley where Senafe lay. Fields opened out to the left of the road as it came down from the ridge. A huge rock outcrop stood on the right of the road by the town; on its top a large metal cross had been erected, visible for miles around. Towers of mosques and spires of churches topped the low-built town. Most of the buildings were rectangles, white washed, their iron doors painted turquoise. The new government buildings had just been finished - a new telecommunications block, an administration building. It was there the car stopped. The administrator invited us into his room and we sat on Formica chairs. We told him we intended to go further south to where we heard there had been shelling. "That is no problem. But the war started three hours ago down the road in Zalambessa." Outside, we clambered into the car, and drove south towards the border.

The people in Senafe did not look very worried. The road followed the valley where there stood another single mountain which turned into the shape of rhinoceros horn as the car went round, up a small ridge and onto a plateau. To the left and right of the plateau, canyons plunged away hundreds of metres down. As we looked straight ahead down the road, the mountains of Ethiopia loomed in the distance; we kept driving. People who had not left earlier now carried what they could. A few pots and pans, and white food sacks strapped onto donkeys. We passed Eritrean artillery guns in small hollows off the main road. When one fired it made such a deafening crack that I thought we were being shot at. We soon were. Stupidly we had not thought that a white car would attract attention. It did, and mortars started landing in the field next to the road. Our driver stopped, as a family sprinted across the ploughed field: a mother in a light-green dress and braided hair pulling her two children alongside her. A camouflaged car pulled up, and screamed at our old driver, we turned around and followed him back to the headquarters. They said they were amused as they had watched us acting like idiots. And now we watched and listened in relative safety to the bone-shaking exchanges of artillery, and the roar of rocket launchers, interspersed with the distant crackle of machine guns. I had no idea how the battle was going. Back in Senafe the wounded started to arrive at the hospital, ferried in the back of speeding army

pick-ups. They had remarkably calm faces but their eyes looked quite terrified. Only a few would make any noise despite their wounds - arms, legs, heads or abdomens wrapped in white bandages, some leaking blood. Inside the hospital, in darker rooms those lightly wounded slumped against the walls.

The Eritreans won at Zalambessa. Ethiopian forces retreated south, the Eritreans followed. Visiting the town, we passed the old border post; corpses lay in the trenches we had seen being built just a few weeks before. As we learnt throughout the war, the Eritreans looked after their casualties very privately: their deaths, unlike those of their enemies, were not for the media.

A few vehicles were burning. An Ethiopian soldier lay in the middle of the road, ignored by the Eritrean soldiers who walked one way, and the displaced civilians walking the other, hauling their belongings with them. On one side of the town, several buildings had been badly damaged, their walls (such as there were) pockmarked by shrapnel. But much of the town still stood: Pepsi Cola signs decorated the walls of buildings which had been bars - a clear difference from Eritrea where Coca Cola ruled. Now, the Eritreans said, this was rightfully their town.

Asmara, 5 - 6 June, 1998

"Are we safe in Asmara?" asked a slightly anxious volunteer teacher sitting at the American bar on Asmara's main boulevard, at 2 o'clock on a Friday afternoon. The fighting had started just days before. Foreigners were called in to the capital from rural areas ready for an evacuation. "Don't worry, it's safe here". I walked off, happy with myself. Ten minutes later two Ethiopian warplanes roared low over the capital to bomb the airport.

The morning in Asmara had been quiet, there was little activity around the airport which doubled as a base for the airforce whose pilots had graduated a week before. In Asmara, people listened intently on their radios to the news of the war - 180 km by road to the south around the town of Zalambessa. The Eritreans seemed to be doing well; few had thought about air attacks.

The sound of the bombing reverberated around Asmara which stood 2-3 km to the north. As stories would reveal later, people in the high-rise buildings on the way to the airport had seen the Ethiopian jets fly past their windows.

Most of the damage was at the airforce base, where guards and technicians had been caught in the bombing. Some were killed, more were wounded. The number of military personnel who died was not released. Those figures were shrouded in Eritrea's universal black-out on any military casualty figures.

The planes came back, and this time they also hit the civilian terminal and a Zambian airliner sitting in the aircraft park. Outside, before the second raid, a group of civilians waited for the usual bus from the airport under a giant

mango tree. Then came the rhythmic boom of anti-aircraft guns, and the sound of jet engines and the deafening crack of explosions. A short time later underneath the giant mango tree, a group of soldiers and police stood around. Most of the road was blocked off. Lumps of rock and earth littered the road. In the middle, the tarmac was stained by bright red fluid and little lumps of pink matter. A man with a piece of cardboard was scraping what was left of human flesh off the road, flicking it into a sack. There were no bodies on the road, most had been taken away to hospital, but one man lay under a white sheet in the verge amongst some bushes. When the Ethiopian jets began strafing the civilian airport, they started their firing a little early. It had cut through those waiting for the bus under the mango tree.

Eritrean planes, in retaliation for the bombing of the airport, bombed the Tigrayan town of Mekele four times. Dozens of civilians, mostly children, were killed when Eritrean bombs struck a school building. The horrendous carnage was replayed on the international news. The Eritrean pilots had graduated a week before. They themselves had all grown up at the EPLF "Revolutionary school" behind the lines during the war of liberation. As children they had been bombed, and bombed again. All the pilots said it was a mistake.

The bombing of Asmara airport had a remarkable effect on the population. Instead of cowering inside their homes, people pouted onto the streets towards the airport, to see if they could do anything to help. Then came the news that one of the raiding planes had been shot down. In the streets people danced, ululated, celebrating - unconcerned if the Ethiopian planes returned. Others sped out of town using every form of transport available in the hope of picking up a souvenir from the downed MiG.

The Ethiopian airforce bombed the airport again on Saturday but this time the Eritreans did not retaliate. The Ethiopians lost another plane in the raid. It was flown by the Ethiopian pilot Bezabir Petros. He was well known to the Eritreans as he had been shot down before during the war of independence. Then, he was captured by the EPLF. He converted to their cause and spent much of the war campaigning for the liberation movements. After the war he returned to Ethiopia, where he again became a senior figure in the Ethiopian airforce. The new Eritrean and Ethiopian governments had military co-operation agreements, some Eritrean pilots trained in Ethiopia, some Ethiopian trainers lived in Eritrea. They knew each other very well.

When Bezabir made his way unceremoniously to Eritrean soil in 1998, he was rescued by the Eritrean military from angry villagers. He was placed in a car and driven back to Asmara. As he was driven up the avenue, people saw who it was sitting in the back of the car. The news of his capture spread like wild fire, people celebrated. Then came a procession of vehicles which had

managed to salvage bits of the plane; one pick-up sped up and down the main avenue, hooting its horn, with a huge aircraft tail fin in the back, along with ecstatic Eritreans waving flags. Bezabir himself was driven into detention, and later spent some time in a military hospital before returning to prison. It is believed that he has since died, but the Eritrean government has refused to confirm or deny the reports.

The effect of the bombing on the foreign community was immediate and quite different. People flocked to the embassies, to sign themselves up for evacuation - an expensive airlift to safety (several western governments charged for the evacuation). The Ethiopian government gave a deadline for the foreigners to leave, after which they said Asmara would be flattened. The expats did leave, some reluctantly, some virtually sprinted for the aircraft. Many of those departing were rather drunk, after quaffing gin and tonic inside embassy grounds while waiting for news of their flight out. Diplomatic officials were either remarkably calm or on the point of breakdown - darting here and there, clutching clip boards, trying to marshall their charges. By the early hours of Sunday morning the evacuation was more or less complete - save for a few Koreans who were left stranded at the airport. The city was quiet, people stayed at home waiting for the bombing. Journalists were camped on the roof of the city's Sunshine Hotel. But no planes came. It would be two years before the Ethiopian planes revisited Asmara.

Many Eritreans were appalled that the foreigners had all gone. It was a sign that the bad times had come again, but there was also real anger and a feeling that they had been let down. One Eritrean businesswoman complained: "you foreigners are happy to drive your Landcruisers and offer help when there is peace, but as soon as there is trouble, when we need help, all of you run away". Those who stayed behind were made to feel especially welcome and privileged to be there. As the World Cup started, people in Asmara relaxed; the fighting was more or less finished for the time being. The city immediately returned to its quiet, laid-back lifestyle, somewhat removed from the war. The two governments, meanwhile, started buying weapons in earnest.

Escalation

The war was not all over by Christmas, as some had predicted. Both Western and Orthodox celebrations had passed. Everyone awaited the next inevitable offensive; bitterness was growing. Just after the fighting subsided in June 1998, the Ethiopian government began a policy of rounding up and deporting those living in Ethiopia who were of Eritrean ethnic origin. The Ethiopian government said it was a security measure. The policy had huge implications, as Eritreans and Ethiopians had lived together and intermarried for years. The policy was denounced as a violation of human rights.

The deportation of ethnic Eritreans from Ethiopia was having an impact on Asmara. Many of the first Eritreans to be rounded up, herded onto buses and deported, were the elite. The well educated and wealthy, whose fortunes now depended on how much money they had outside Ethiopia. Many lost everything, and struggled to come to terms with the loss of a lifetime of work. In the countryside, the rural deportees lived in camps or with relatives across the border. They too had lost their homes, their possessions, and crucially their livestock, confiscated before they were sent across the border. The sense of bitterness was very real, in part because no one had imagined that deportation would happen. Eritreans would sometimes mutter that even the former Ethiopian dictator, Mengistu, had never done it. But then again his priorities were different. Many of those deported did not speak Tigrinya, and many felt more Ethiopian than Eritrean. Many of the young who grew up in the towns and cities of Ethiopia were torn between regret for their lives taken away and a desire not to show that they missed anything in Ethiopia. Addis styles came to Asmara from dresses to dance, the 'Electric Slide' hit the night club dance floors. Since the start of the war, Eritreans would speak of their historic dislike of the Tigrayans of northern Ethiopia. "We never trusted them"... "We helped them and see what they have done to us" were almost standard responses. Then there was the general belief, espoused strongly by the Eritrean deportees, that Ethiopia's majority ethnic groups, the Amhara and Oromo, would remove the minority Tigrayans from power. In all, a rapid transformation from the words of brotherly love repeated about Ethiopia in the months that preceded the war.

Despair and real animosity towards Ethiopia first showed itself publicly following the loss of Badme. In February, the Ethiopians had launched their offensive, on both the western and central fronts. The fighting started a day after the Ethiopian government claimed an Eritrean aircraft had bombed the town of Adigrat - though people contacted in the town were unaware of ever being bombed. (The reality was that on a training flight, an unarmed Eritrean fighter had strayed close to the border and had been damaged but not downed by an Ethiopian anti-aircraft missile.) In Asmara the Ethiopian story could only mean one thing: the Ethiopian offensive was about to start. Across Asmara the dogs howled that night as if they knew what was coming.

For the first two weeks, the Eritreans held on. They claimed they had inflicted heavy losses on Ethiopia. And when Ethiopia claimed territorial success, western journalists were on hand at the front on the Eritrean side to disprove the stories.

On the frontlines the Eritrean army in the west became even more confident and launched its own counter attacks. In the space of twenty-four hours, the situation changed. Ethiopia attacked an under-manned part of the

line, and broke through. The Eritrean options were clear, move the entire line back to safer positions, or fight it out with high casualties. The Eritreans pulled back, Badme was left. The effect of the loss of Badme on the population of Asmara was quite devastating. Throughout the city, people sat in groups, heads in hands, talking quietly. It was as if everyone had lost a close friend or relative. Young and old people who had not been called up talked of volunteering. It was the first time since Independence that the Eritrean army had lost. Older veterans tried to explain to the young, and partly to convince themselves, that they had faced defeats or withdrawals in the past but in the end had been victorious. In a strange way, most of the people I talked to that day were worried that the war was over, that this was the way it was to end. The Eritrean government had over-night accepted the peace deal that it had so long balked at signing. As the day wore on, more and more people called to see if we had any information from Ethiopia as to its response to the loss of Badme and Eritrea's acceptance of the peace. Finally Reuters came back and said Ethiopia was not available to comment. In Asmara, people looked around and sensed what it meant. The war would go on. "Fine," people said, "now we will show them." Then the war could end.

Igremekel, near Tsorona, Central Front, 110 km south of Asmara, March 1999

As I walked across the flat dry land towards the front line, thick black smoke rose into the blue sky. Looking down, the dusty ground sparkled with thousands of sharp lumps of shrapnel, the aftermath of 4 days of intensive shelling. The light blue tail fins of two unexploded Ethiopian bombs stuck out of the ground 50 metres apart. This was Igremekel on the Tsorona front.

At the earthworks, which marked the front-line trench, Eritrean soldiers sat around, smoking cigarettes, chatting happily. Many looked exhausted, the fighting had raged day and night. A few Ethiopian corpses lay behind the earthworks, but that was nothing compared to the sight that awaited me as I walked through a gap in the front line. On my immediate right, in a space of about 10 yards, fifteen Ethiopian soldiers lay dead on and around the earthworks, some were lying in the trench dug into the ground in front of the mounds of earth. Looking along the trench in both directions, the bodies continued. Some were half buried, some had heads missing, some were bloated, killed in the first wave of attacks two days before, some had only died that morning. All had a thin layer of orange dust on the faces, as the wind blew swirling gusts around the trench. How did we know they were Ethiopian? Firstly many wore distinctive Ethiopian uniform; they also wore boots, unlike most Eritrean soldiers. Secondly most were dead on top of the trenches, in positions which suggested they were attacking, and most convincingly, the Eritrean soldiers were very happy to point out any corpses that journalists didn't see. "Look there's one" was a common

remark. It's very unlikely that the soldiers would take such pleasure in pointing out the bodies of their dead friends. The Eritrean dead had already been removed.

I saw at least three hundred Ethiopian dead in two hundred metres, during a brief walk along the trench. At least one every metre. The bodies did not stop after 200 metres, they continued as far as I could see. I just became sick of counting, and time was against us, it was getting late in the afternoon, journalists were anxious to file the story. The army was also getting worried as machine gun and artillery exchanges continued intermittently, the attacks had only stopped 6 hours before. Many more Ethiopian corpses lay in the flat scrub land that was no mans land, which stretched back 3 km to the starting point of the assault.

The horrific thought, which would not leave me, was that these three hundred Ethiopian dead were the ones that had actually made it across the 3 km to this small part of the line while under constant artillery, tank, mortar, machine gun and even rifle fire. The area of the fiercest fighting covered 15 sq. kms, yet I only saw 200 metres. If one extrapolates from what we saw, the Ethiopian casualty figures would easily be in the thousands.

The Ethiopian army was using First World War tactics, with First World War results. Mass slaughter for no ground gained, where human losses did not seem to matter, under the terrible military rationale that since the population of Ethiopia is 60 million, 17 times larger than Eritrea's population, therefore mass attacks must work.

Looking at the carnage, I remembered when I was in Asmara a few weeks before and I met Eritrean soldiers who had been fighting at the Badme front: they would become very depressed talking about the fighting. "It's just slaughter", they would tell me, "we shoot all day, they die, then more come; it's sick."

My mind snapped back to Tsorona. There was too much to take in, bodies to avoid stepping on. No mans land in front of this small section of the line was littered with the burnt remnants of at least twenty Ethiopian tanks, their barrels pointing towards Eritrean positions. Some had been hit just yards from the front line. Two Ethiopian bulldozers lay burning - not what I thought would be used in an attack. Armoured personnel carriers had also been hit, one actually made it on top of the Eritrean trench before being destroyed. There were more; I could see objects in the bush that looked like tanks or APCs, but I did not count them.

The Eritrean soldiers still in position had tissues stuffed up their noses because of the smell of decomposing corpses: "we had no time to bury them", sighed an Eritrean female soldier, stationed on the front, her hair hidden by a khaki bandanna. Fighting had continued for three days and two nights, the bodies piling up around the Eritrean positions, the smell of death getting stronger. The Eritrean commanders said their losses had been very light in comparison. But for those in the front line, the defence had clearly been desperate, even some hand-to-hand fighting. Heavy losses were inescapable.

Days after the trip to the front, when all the media interest died down, with no more TV pictures to show, I still could not get the images out of my mind. Occasionally I could again smell the sickly sweet stench of decaying bodies. The depressing thought was that the scene we had witnessed would be repeated. I thought about the Organisation of African

Unity in Addis Ababa, the sponsors of the peace plan, who had still said nothing about the continued slaughter taking place 600 km north of their headquarters. And I thought about the claims that what we saw was just a publicity stunt, and this only made the thousands of lives lost seem even more pointless. If this war is to end, the public - especially in Ethiopia and Eritrea - must be aware of the reality of this bloody conflict. My personal fear is that for most people, the truth about what happened will be buried by the sand which now covers the bodies of those who died in a futile battle on Eritrea's southern border.

I wrote these words in March 1999, a few days after the battle. It was perhaps the defining moment of the war for me. What we witnessed that day seemed to epitomise so much about the fighting: the large number of casualties, the nature of the battle, the fact that so few people were on hand to report the slaughter, and the general frustration that so little was happening to end the war. That battle was important in its own sake. It came a month after the Eritreans lost the village of Badme, the psychological sore of the conflict. Its aftermath could be read in two ways: the Eritreans had inflicted enough of a defeat that peace was now acceptable - or it was just a foretaste of more to come. The battlefield itself became the Eritrean government's showpiece for visiting journalists. In time, all that remained of the battle were rusting hulks of the Ethiopian tanks and a few human bones or skeletons left in the minefields.

When I went back not long after the battle, the personal effects of the dead soldiers were still there amongst the debris. On all the battlefields during the war, it was this that would move me most, when the number of dead in itself was no longer so shocking. Strewn around were memories of the lives lost. Some items stick out more than others. Photos of a soldier with his friends and family, taken before the battles began, posing with his gun. And a notebook in which one soldier, from Nazareth in Ethiopia, had begun to write a diary in English, describing his life in school and work. The final sentence was unfinished.

While peace was being negotiated...

After the battle at Igremekel, the fronts returned to relative calm, but the peace negotiations continued with a different slant. Ethiopia swapped roles with Eritrea as the country that had been accepting a truce in principle, yet refusing it in practice. The deportations continued and became almost normal.

In Eritrea, mass mobilisation picked up pace, more rounds of national service were drafted and sent off to the military training camp at Sawa. The sweeps for draft dodgers increased as well. National service applied to men and women between the ages of 18 and 40. Some people were exempt, for example mothers did not serve. But the exemptions for men were few and

the government continually tightened the regulations. The effect of mass mobilisation on Eritrea was drastic. The capital was rapidly drained of younger Eritreans. The economy suffered through a diminished workforce and because the people on National Service would only get 150 Nakfa a month pocket money (approximately \$15.00). The Nakfa was rapidly depreciating against the dollar, and Eritrea relied almost exclusively on imports. The main income keeping the country afloat came from the loyal Diaspora, in remittances to families and the government. A subculture of how to avoid the draft began to develop and has grown dramatically since the end of the war. It should be said that most people simply went when called, but some really did not want to go. Either they did not want to be in the army, felt they had already been in for long enough, or their families desperately needed them at home to run the business and earn some real money. People became very adept at hiding. There was an informal system of passing information as to when there would be a sweep of military police. The greatest resistance came to the drafting of women. It had always been present amongst some rural Islamic communities in Eritrea, but resistance slowly spread to towns and cities. Concerns were raised especially after stories circulated of sexual harassment, rape, or extra-marital relations and pregnancies out of wedlock. All were considered socially unacceptable in Eritrea's traditional Christian and Islamic communities. The stories were common enough for the government to act, though without making any public statement. Many Eritrean female soldiers were withdrawn from the front after the fighting in 1999 following on complaints from families, but women continued to be drafted for National Service. Part of the problem was that most of the female veterans from the war of independence were no longer in the army because they had become mothers. Key role models had gone.

In between the offensives, the war never seemed far away. Ethiopian aircraft bombed the port of Massawa, destroying a workshop in the port and killing one man who had turned up early for work. The planes bombed the military camp at Sawa and the southern town of Mendefera, where a radar station was located. The small town of Adi Keih was hit one lunchtime, and the local Church was badly damaged. People there said the church had drawn the bombs away from the nearby school. The second Independence Day since the start of the war came and went, with a feeling of false bonhomie. The parties went ahead, the full-scale, Korean-style mass formation dancing took place. But the crowds on the streets were visibly younger than the previous year. So many young men and women were now in the army. Within a month, fighting had restarted, concentrated in western Eritrea. We made our preparations and left for the front.

Elala, Western Front, June 1999

Up the dry slopes, past Ethiopian corpses, turned yellow after lying in the sun since March, we walked to the rough-hewn rock trenches. The hills below extended on all sides. From Hill 1162, the Eritreans had moved forward several kilometres to the last line of hills before the disputed area of Badme. Beyond the ridge, the flat plains of Badme dropped away. Occasionally, the faint whistling of an Eritrean artillery volley could be heard passing overhead, the flash of impact on the ridge beyond marking Ethiopian front line positions. The sound of the explosion would follow seconds later and echo around the hills. It was a quiet day on this section of the front.

Away to the right, however, Eritrean and Ethiopian forces had been fighting since the morning. Artillery from both sides were pounding each other as the infantry scrambled for better positions on high ground. "The fighting has never stopped, it just cooled", explained Colonel Berhane Ogbagober. He said Eritrean forces on all sides of the 50 km-long, u-shaped front line had advanced, some up to six kilometres. The Ethiopians were attempting to retake lost ground, while the Eritreans were trying to make further gains. Many of the hills now being contested had been irrelevant before Eritrean forces were forced to pull back from positions they held on the Ethiopian side of the Badme plains at the end of February. To reach secure ground on Hill 1162, the Eritreans had retreated 17 km. Now hill by hill they were moving forward again.

We had arrived on the front that morning, driving across a ford in the Gash river, as the first rains swept water down from the highlands into the wide rivers of western Eritrea. Soldiers were working in the shallows trying to shore up the ford. They laboured with their combat trousers rolled up, stripped to the waist, or wearing white vests. Further on down the river, herdsmen with cut off trousers and white shawls, accompanied by children and small, angry-looking dogs marshalled oxen across the river. The front was not far. We drove for twenty minutes on winding dirt tracks, flanked by tall date palms with razor sharp fronds. Our Landcruiser pulled up the usual cloud of white dust, which trailed the car - rains had not arrived in the lowlands yet. We conducted our initial tour of the front with Colonel Berhane, a smallish man with a kind round face. He seemed intelligent and honest, thankfully not a politician. He wore a peaked camouflage cap, and a khaki shirt, which strained with his belly. The years of peace had not been too bad.

We arrived back at the camp that evening. It was the headquarters of an artillery battalion on the western front. The camp was spread amongst small hills. A few eucalyptus trees dotted what had been a little village. The residents had long since fled, now living under plastic sheeting in large camps for displaced people which dotted western and central Eritrea.

Few soldiers lived in the small number of huts that still stood. Their homes were the dug-outs cut into the sides of the small hills. Log lintels supported the entrances, outside shell casings and red Coca Cola crates lay around. The soldiers, with thin young faces and cropped hair, were dressed as usual with the mixture of camouflage - the brown "desert storm" and "jungle" green. Several wore T-shirts emblazoned with pictures of Princess Diana, the lyrics to "Candle in the wind" printed on the back. Two Eritrean friends had

joined us on the trip. They both grew up abroad and had returned to Eritrea to do national service. Since the war they had been stationed in Asmara, and were desperate to find out what happened to their friends - not seen since they had completed basic training at Sawa.

Also with us was Hagos, an old fighter who worked with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and was in charge of liaison with journalists. Yet he was helpful - full of knowledge, humour, and a desire for us to see as much as possible. He had fought at Elala during the liberation war, some twenty years before. Like many of our trips it turned into a bit of a reunion. In Eritrea, military experience bonded young and old. Robel had brought letters and gifts, including cakes, from Asmara. Sweet tea was drunk inside the bunkers lit by kerosene lamps, the walls covered by empty wheatsacks. Conversation switched to who was where, what was happening on different fronts. Finding out who was alive or dead would be done more privately.

Walking in single file through dry riverbeds we made our way to the front line. The crackle of machine guns could be heard. Robel stopped to pick up a piece of shrapnel that littered the parched ground. "If you already have a piece, you won't get hit by another", he explained. I followed his logic, putting a jagged lump of brown metal into my pocket.

Closer to the lines, a few Ethiopian corpses lay unburied, a week old, the smell of decay overwhelming. Others were partly covered by sand. Many rocks were stained by dry blood, the thorny branches of some trees were hung with torn, bloodstained fatigues, the ground littered by contents of knapsacks. In one bush lay an arm, camouflaged, with stiff dark fingers protruding from the cuff. In total, I counted thirty Ethiopian dead during the walk to the line. It was impossible to tell from this whether the claims of over 20,000 casualties made by either side were true. The Eritrean soldiers scoffed at Ethiopian claims about the number of Eritreans killed. "We don't even have that many on the entire front line", said one.

We crawled to the final Eritrean positions. Eritrean soldiers leant into the rocks, makeshift protection from snipers, whose bullets had scratched the rocks white.

The front line was new. There had not been time or security to build trenches. The soldiers stared intently at the Ethiopian positions just 50 metres away. They said Eritrean snipers had killed four Ethiopians that morning. The tension was high. Robel, for the first time, seemed worried. The fighting had not reached this section of the line, but just an hour after we left, it did.

We had walked, and crawled, to the front dressed in Eritrean army hats or jackets. They did not want the Ethiopians to know that the front had "guests". We had argued about the issue of proper front-line attire since the start of the war and in the end we accepted the local school of thought: the sight of a journalist in traditional "I am a civilian" colours (bright blue, pink, yellow), though commendable, was certain to draw fire. Unsurprisingly this was not welcome by soldiers on the line, especially as the Ethiopians knew that an officer would accompany any journalists, which made the group an even more tempting target.

As night drew in, the wind picked up and rain clouds approached. Soldiers at a camp

in a village behind the lines ran into shelters dug into the hillside, illuminated by the fires for making tea. The rain was expected to stop the fighting but no soldier was confident that it would. As the rain fell, the shelling did subside, until 11 o'clock that night. Then Ethiopian gunners decided to say good night to their Eritrean counterparts, sending volleys of shells over the camp, waking us from a brief sleep. The Eritrean guns answered, then fell silent for a few hours as other parts of the front became the target.

The next morning, the sound of artillery never stopped. A column of Eritrean troops appeared over a hill behind the camp and snaked its way past us towards the front. They walked silently in single file, their eyes ignoring all around them. Kalashnikovs, machine guns or RPGs were slung over their shoulders. A few carried rolled up stretchers, or a long, wrapped bundle, a carefully protected sniper rifle. All wore the coloured twisted Kerchuf, which doubled as a bed sheet and a burial shroud; it was twisted into a kind of rope and dangled from the army belt, or was worn diagonally across the chest.

Further back, behind the lines, soldiers relaxed, ignoring the constant boom of the artillery battle. They ate breakfast and drank tea while listening to reggae, sometimes slowed by the dying batteries in the cassette player. Only the jolting crack of Eritrean guns occasionally broke the strangely peaceful atmosphere. An Eritrean soldier with long dreadlocks spoke as we ate breakfast. He was from Germany, he said, but had been picked up in Asmara and sent for military training. He had dual nationality; no one, he sighed, cared about his German passport. He looked resigned to his fate. As we got up to leave he turned and said smiling, "one love, one heart, peace". Peace, though, still seemed a long way away.

Our final trip to Elala was the following year, just a couple of months before the third round of fighting. We visited a slightly different section of the line. This time there were more journalists, more government control and no Colonel Berhane who was back at his HQ. The Eritrean advances of the previous June had not succeeded in getting back the good positions required for a solid defensive line on the western front. We had learned that the fighting the previous June had resulted in heavy losses for Eritrea. We never knew the number, but clearly being on the offensive always took its toll. No one at the front would talk about such things. Instead, all the talk was about the Ethiopian build-up opposite.

Even though there had not yet been a major offensive, it was clear that the killing on the front had never stopped. Often soldiers in the front would be obliged to crawl out of their trenches on night patrols - through no mans land to the Ethiopian trenches, to raid or just to listen. Any movement would result in a barrage of fire, even from Dushka heavy-calibre machine guns; normally used against aircraft, they can have a devastating effect on a human body.

But there were still some lighter moments. The soldiers with great pride offered us fresh vegetables and salad they had grown behind the lines; part of

the Eritrean army's drive for self-sufficiency. A commander talked of being a farmer after the war. A soldier tried to make traditional coffee, but was shooed away by a young woman, one of the few who remained at the front. She was the unit's medic. Apparently medics had a relatively short life expectancy, the third-best target for a sniper after an officer and the radio operator.

During the final phase of the war, we tried to find out what had happened to those at Elala. I was told that the front was under constant air and artillery bombardment, which had been more accurate than anyone had expected. There were casualties but the order had been given for the fronts to be evacuated following the Ethiopian breakthrough to the east, at Enda Amba Simon. I met Colonel Berhane after the war during celebrations to mark the anniversary of the liberation of Massawa in 1990. Robel found that the medic with the coffee had survived. We did not know about the German Eritrean with the dreadlocks.

Away from the war

After the first year of the war, it had dawned on most people that there was little chance of a diplomatic solution - a final military showdown was the only way it would end. But away from the fronts, society had again adapted to make the conflict seem normal. In Asmara, most foods were still available except for the grain teff which was used in the making of the traditional flat bread, injera. (Teff was grown mainly in Ethiopia, and had to be imported by an expensive, circuitous route). The problem was that inflation was considerable, running at roughly thirty percent. Prices continued to rise as Eritrea's currency, the Nakfa, weakened further against the US dollar. Outside the capital, the agricultural outlook was bleak. Poor rains dealt another blow to farmers, already affected by the loss of workers due to the draft. On top of this, at least three hundred thousand Eritreans displaced by the fighting were making do in sprawling tent camps spread throughout the country. The displaced were reliant on hand-outs from the Eritrean government's humanitarian wing (ERREC), the United Nations and the foreign NGOs who had been allowed back into the country. The camps themselves were remarkably organised - divided along the lines of the towns and villages from which the displaced had fled. Schools were set up, run in shifts to accommodate the huge number of children. The displaced were being given food but needed more. There was access to some health facilities, but many living out in the dusty windswept camps had developed illnesses and infections, and were at risk of malaria after the rains. The problem, as far as a cynical international media was concerned, was that though the conditions were bad, they were not bad enough to warrant any special attention. The authorities in Eritrea were organised enough to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe of the

kind witnessed in other developing countries. The generosity and dignity of the people in the camps was staggering to an outsider. Despite living with virtually nothing, the old custom of hospitality would be respected - offering visitors coffee or bread. Many used what meagre resources they had to buy basic commodities from nearby towns, and then sell them in the camps. Each camp had its own plastic tent version of a high street.

In the towns of Eritrea, though emptied of civilians by national service, there was also a degree of normality. Football matches continued, as the government exempted first-division players from national service. Cycling races, perhaps Eritreans' favourite sport, also took place. One of the country's leading cyclists, Yonas Zakarias, was removed from his army unit on the Western front by a concerned, cycling-devoted General and sent back to Asmara, so that he could continue to compete.

The music of the war also went through some changes. Already most Eritrean singers, with a few exceptions, would sing songs about sacrifice and the liberation struggle. Of course, the old favourites from the liberation war were replayed on the radio. For the military, Eritrea's top musicians would tour the country playing to soldiers stationed around Eritrea, as they had during the liberation war. Most musicians devoted their songs to supporting the war effort. At the beginning of the war, a former fighter known as Wadi Tokul released a new album, which contained the Tigrinya hits "Sawa", about the national military training centre, and "Teshamo", meaning "come on, let's get on with it". Perhaps the most disturbing song was sung by an Eritrean comedian, the basic refrain of which was translated as "Are You Happy Now?" The video for the song showed the singer dressed in camouflage (which was considered *de rigeur*), superimposed onto footage of battles, and grisly close-ups of dead or captured Ethiopians. Eritreans remarked, with a smile, that after the loss of Badme, the Ethiopian radio had played the song back to the Eritreans. Not to be outdone, after the Eritrean victory at Igremekel, Asmara again broadcast the song, this time with more up-to-date footage. And thankfully there it appeared to end. During the later stages of the war, though, other songs moved in to replace the original hits, perhaps because these smacked of the slight naiveté and bravado of the early days of the conflict, before reality had set in. Despite the war, Amharic songs, though Ethiopian, were also quite popular. Perhaps because they were just good tunes, or because they would be songs about love and not fighting. No doubt the influx of Eritrean deportees from Addis Ababa had an impact too. But in music, at least, it was difficult to lose the pre-war ties between the two countries.

The final offensive, May/June 2000

A delegation from the UN Security Council led by Richard Holbrooke visited both Addis Ababa and Asmara in a last-ditch attempt to stop the war. It was clear when they left on 10 May 2000 that a new offensive was imminent. On the 12th of May, exactly two years after the Eritrean army first went into Badme, the Ethiopians unleashed their final offensive. They attacked in the west, but at a point no one had expected. Around one hundred thousand infantry, aided by pack animals, gathered in Tigray province just over the border - their presence apparently unknown to Eritrean intelligence.

The Ethiopian army set out across a dry river bed and up steep mountains, where Eritrean defences were virtually non-existent. Calls for reinforcements were ignored, though critics say a small number of well armed and supported troops could have held such a pass, which was steep enough to prevent Ethiopian heavy weapons being brought in with the advance. But even if the Ethiopian troops had made it into Eritrea, they would certainly have been in a precarious position had Ethiopian tanks not been able to break through and link up. The Eritreans thought they could hold the rest of the line and stop the tanks. They could not. Eventually with the line breaking at various junctions the order was given to pull back. Some Eritrean troops retreated north, to block the way to the symbolic regional capital in Western Eritrea, Barentu, while others retreated to the east towards the highlands. The Ethiopian army, facing limited resistance, moved North at a rapid rate and closed in on Barentu. As it turned out, the move to Barentu was a mistake. The bulk of the Eritrean army did not stand and fight on the plains of western Eritrea where, in the face of Ethiopian superiority on the ground and in the air, the Eritrean army would have been decimated. It did though suffer a crisis of identity. Clearly the Eritrean army was not an army of national defence, which would hold ground at all costs. It was being run in part like the old EPLF: giving up land to fight another day. The difficulty soldiers were facing was highlighted by the case of four senior officers, who refused to pull out of the defence of Barentu. They were old liberation fighters who had been through it all, but who as defenders of the new independent Eritrea, would not countenance further withdrawals. The story goes that they sent the rest of their soldiers back as the government had ordered, but they themselves and some of their bodyguards made a last stand on the outskirts of Barentu. I was told that all but one was killed.

In the end, Ethiopia took control of almost a third of the country, but the advance north to Barentu gave the Eritreans time to reorganise the defence of the highlands, where the capital Asmara was located.

The government refused journalists permission to go West or South towards the front. Old travel permits were tried and they worked through

some road-blocks but would eventually be questioned, so we would be forced to turn round. In Asmara, new information was flooding in, but for many people, the news mutated under the pressure of rumour and hope. There was often talk that "the Eritreans had counter attacked", "the Ethiopians were cut off and surrounded", "it was all an elaborate plan by the President". The reality took a while to sink in. The news of the fall of Barentu was not anticipated by most of the population. Still people clung to hope; the Eritrean army would not let this happen. The news broadcast by the government was more bizarre - stories about national development, not much about the war. Surely this was enough of a clue. Then one evening five days after the offensive had started, an announcement was made at the very end of the nightly broadcast. Barentu had fallen. It had a catastrophic effect on the people of Asmara, as the reality of what was happening in the West was finally brought home. People had been stocking up on fuel, but now there was a more urgent sense of impending disaster. From Barentu it was not far, east across the plains, to Eritrea's second city, Keren.

The government also missed an opportunity to show the humanitarian cost of the fighting in the West. Without foreign journalists, the bombing of Eritrean villages and towns in the path of the Ethiopian advance went unreported. For four days and nights, Ethiopian aircraft had hit Barentu itself. There were reports of up to sixty civilians killed, many more wounded, in one raid alone. It was impossible at the time to corroborate. The Eritrean army held the town long enough for the civilian population to be evacuated, then it too fell back.

Throughout western Eritrea, hundreds of thousands were on the move. Displaced people living in camps fled North, away from the advancing Ethiopians. Those who had considered themselves safe were inundated with people fleeing the fighting. Then as the boom of artillery came close, they too set out on foot with the few belongings they could carry. Most went East towards Keren, along the flat plains where temperatures were approaching 40 degrees and water was scarce. The civilians were mainly women, children and the elderly; the men were in the army. Some military vehicles stopped to give assistance, but in general transport was very limited. Those who made it to the new makeshift camps around Keren told of scores of people dying by the roadside.

In Asmara there was a growing feeling that the city was under siege. Yet typically the preparations and rehearsals went ahead as planned for the Independence anniversary on the 24th May. The Ethiopians were advancing towards Mendefera in the highlands. Mendefera was only about an hour from the capital and if the Ethiopians made it into the highlands at that point Asmara would surely fall. Hourly, vehicles running through the capital from

one front to the other would disgorge the latest news that would spread through the city.

The fall of Barentu had at least psychologically prepared people for the worst. There was some thought given to what would happen if the Ethiopians broke through to Asmara. A return to Nakfa for another long-drawn-out war was an option that was terrifyingly realistic in the minds of many. But an uglier side to the growing paranoia was soon evident. Thousands of Ethiopians had been repatriated during the war, though initially they were not rounded up and stripped of their possessions in the same way as Eritreans had been in Ethiopia. But in some parts of the country, such as western Eritrea, there was popular pressure on the authorities to remove Ethiopians from the area. This was done in various ways: many employers refused to give Ethiopians work, who then became destitute. Many opted simply to return to Ethiopia and were repatriated by the International Committee of the Red Cross. Some were imprisoned as spies. The Eritrean government publicly called for tolerance of Ethiopians and despite tighter regulations on Ethiopian residents, there was still a large number of Ethiopians in Eritrea by the time of the offensive in 2000 - fifty thousand, maybe more. It seemed a considerable number considering that so many Eritreans were away from home in the armed forces. More importantly, a few did work for Ethiopian intelligence. Intercepted transmissions to Ethiopian aircraft would give precise details of troop movements, including the time a convoy left a town. Though this information was not public at the time, there was, in any case, a growing popular fear of an Ethiopian "fifth column" in Eritrea: Ethiopian civilians living amongst the community waiting for the moment when the Ethiopian army came near before striking from within. Ethiopian young men were rounded up and placed in camps around the capital - in some cases for their own protection as Ethiopians became targets for abuse and, on some occasions, physical attack. But these events were relatively rare.

As the Ethiopian advance in the West appeared to halt, attention in Asmara shifted almost entirely towards what was happening on the central front South of the capital. The greatest concern focussed specifically on the situation on the approaches to Mendefera, from the South at Adi Quala, from the West at Mai Duma and Areza, and from the East through the Hazemo plain. The Ethiopians attacked from these three directions. Troops were diverted to the area from other fronts. Most of the convoys moved at night to avoid air attacks.

In the shade of trees outside Mendefera hundreds of soldiers from one convoy lay in the shade of eucalyptus trees. Almost all were sleeping, covered in dust, they had been driven all the way from the western front on a roundabout route to pick up the fight again on the slopes

of the highlands. Along the road south from Asmara, Eritrean civilians cooked food and the slightly alcoholic traditional brew of Suwa. The convoys would slow to allow the food and Suwa to be passed up to the soldiers packed into open trucks, festooned with yellow plastic Jerry cans. The women would ululate and clap. The young, exhausted soldiers their heads wrapped in their all-purpose Kerchuffs, would manage a smile or a wave. An old, thin man and his plump greying wife, her hair neatly braided stood with other villagers watching. There was a shout from the convoy, "Mama... mama", they both looked up, a soldier balanced on top of crates of supplies waved at the couple. They burst out calling his name, waving maniacally, moving unconsciously towards the departing truck. They kept waving as the truck rolled out along the tarmac road towards the front. "It's the first time I have seen him in two years", the mother explained. They both continued to look South, with tears in their eyes.

The Ethiopian army did not manage to break through on that section of the line, but the situation was clearly desperate.

Former liberation leaders who were involved in a fierce argument with the President over his conduct of the war and their exclusion from it, had travelled to the fronts themselves to see what they could do to help. Petros Solomon, Mesfin Hagos and Ogbe Abraha went to front-line commanders to help devise a defensive line in the South. One of the three, Petros Solomon, was still a minister in the government and had been one of the chief strategists during the war of independence. Mesfin Hagos was one of the top Generals during that war and during the peace had been the Minister of Defence but was then moved to be Governor of the Southern region. Ogbe Abraha had been Chief of Staff in the Eritrean military, but he had fallen foul of the President. These were not minor people. Word of the split within the leadership was starting to become known, mainly amongst Eritrea's key western allies at the Italian and American embassies. As it turned out, the divisions within the leadership had gone back years to pre-war days. Conduct of foreign policy, the internal power of the President, and the time table for elections were all points of friction. But the war was exacerbating the internal debate. There was even talk of a possible coup as the military situation looked to be out of control. But even opponents of the President said this was never seriously considered; unity was still the paramount concern. And so the divisions were never put on public display until after the war was over.

The Assab plain

One of the other senior figures in dispute with the President, the Eritrean foreign minister, Haile Woldensae was trying to get the United States to put pressure on the Ethiopians to stop their offensive. The Ethiopian government had said it would consider stopping if Eritrea withdrew from all areas it

considered were in "dispute". This demand would have the greatest impact on the front line around Eritrea's southern port of Assab. The front was 70 km from the port, and since 1998 had withstood all Ethiopian attempts at breaking through. Now, Eritrean forces were being asked to leave their well prepared and defended trenches, and set up positions again in the open, flat, volcanic plain just 50 kilometres from the port. Since the war began, most people in Eritrea were convinced that what the Ethiopians had wanted all along was the port. Leading a landlocked country of 60 million, politicians in Ethiopia had demanded Assab be captured. But the Ethiopian army in Assab was limited in size - most troops were being used to fight in the western and central fronts. The Eritrean commanders in Assab estimated that there were around 40 to 50 thousand Ethiopian troops facing them. The Eritreans said this was partly due to the Ethiopians having only a limited water supply - critical in the harsh desert terrain where temperatures could reach the high 40s.

The Eritreans complied with the Ethiopian demand and moved back. Their soldiers hastily built a wall out of sandbags and the sharp, black volcanic rocks that lay amongst the sand. It was not long before the Ethiopians attacked. The fighting raged for almost two weeks - mostly at night, as the day was too hot for attacking. Assab was considered to be one of the worst fronts. The fighting had usually been brief, but the weather was so hot that the soldiers' plastic sandals had been known to melt. The land was flat which meant there was virtually no cover from artillery; both sides could see each aspect of the battlefield. And to make matters worse, the volcanic rocks were so sharp they would splinter like shrapnel during an artillery barrage. The situation in Assab was looking quite bad for the Eritreans. In Asmara the word coming out of the President's office, though not official, was that Assab was to be evacuated. In fact, the government's political organisation, the PFDJ, had started evacuating its computers and files. But finally the army commanders on the ground overruled the leadership in Asmara. They refused to evacuate and insisted on holding the line at all costs.

We flew in on a small propeller aircraft buffeted by wind and terrified of crossing paths with Ethiopian fighters. We skimmed over the Red Sea coast, desert bordered by the mottled blue and green of shallow water and coral. We landed on a huge, empty runway. Two defunct Ethiopian fighters stood off to one side, reminders of the days when this had been the last outpost of Mengistu's regime in Eritrea. We were met by army vehicles, this trip had been cleared at the top. From the airport, we raced to the edge of the port of Assab, which seemed quiet, almost deserted. Occasionally you could glimpse, through gaps in buildings, the tall cranes of the port, which had stood idle since the war began. The roads leading from the port were rutted by the heavy tread of tanks, shipped down the coast from Eritrea's other port of Massawa. We skirted the town, and joined the pristine highway, which headed

directly towards Ethiopia. It had been the main artery for Ethiopian imports, six hundred trucks a day would roll up and down the road crossing into Ethiopia just 70 km down the road. Now the road was intersected at right angles by the front line, just 40 km from the town. We raced along in the back of an army pick-up - the tyres humming on the black tarmac, which cut like a ribbon through the moonscape of brown sand, dotted with black volcanic rock. We stopped at a stone building by the side of the road, where other military vehicles had parked. There, grouped on one side, squatted about forty Ethiopian prisoners, all covered in dust. One man was clutching a bandage to his face that oozed blood. He wailed, some of the other prisoners told him to be quiet. He was for a while, but gradually his sobbing built up, until again one of his comrades would tell him to hush. He started to speak in quick, sobbed sentences. He said he and his friends had been pinned down under fire and had tried to surrender. But the commanding officer had threatened to kill them if they did. Still, he said they took their chance and stood up to surrender, so his officer threw a grenade, which had blown off his nose.

Back in the pick-ups, we drove further, over a slight crest. The horizon opened, from one edge to the other plumes of smoke rose from the ground as artillery on both sides showered the front line. My own fear grew to extremes, there was nowhere to hide, I felt terrifyingly exposed. It was dusk, the temperature was dropping off slightly. Eritrean tanks and mortars were placed behind protective walls of piled stone and sandbag. Off to one side, six field guns stood in a line, their barrels flashed almost in unison, then - as we drove on - the crack rolled forward a fraction of a second later. The front line was another stone and sandbag wall hastily built up above the ground. They had been ordered to leave their trenches some thirty kilometres further forward, to meet Ethiopia's conditions for a cease fire that was clearly yet to be implemented. I asked the Colonel what he thought of the order to pull back. He said he obeyed his orders, but he spat out the words with disgust. "What can you do?", he said. "We will not let the Ethiopians through". He looked tired, "it's been going like this for over a week", he said, "but now we have things under control". Back in Assab city that night, looking in the direction of the front 40 kms away, the horizon flashed, as if a big electrical storm was hovering over the land.

When the line was held, the decision was made to send more troops to secure Assab. An unmarked airliner, rented by the government, helped ferry hundreds of troops and equipment from the capital to the port in the far south. In the end, Assab was one of the most costly battles for the Eritreans. Of course now the President and his critics blame each other for ordering the evacuation of Assab. Though retaining Assab was of enormous political and national significance, the port remains at a standstill. Ninety percent of its business was with Ethiopia, which has kept up its wartime boycott of Eritrean facilities. And on the battlefield outside of the town, the unclaimed remains of soldiers killed in the fighting are still being collected.

During the fighting in May, Ethiopia succeeded in recapturing the town

of Zalambessa on the central front. The town had been reduced to ruins by the Eritrean army and local people were encouraged to strip the buildings to help construct shelters in displacement camps. The Eritrean front line was broken to the East of the town, and the decision was made to pull everyone back. As usual there was the some confusion. Not everyone was informed, and many of the local civilian population were only told at the very last minute. Many elderly simply had to stay put and wait for the Ethiopians, as they pushed on into Eritrea. The Ethiopians marched unopposed into the town of Serha, destroying the customs post from where I had watched the trenches being built two years before. They also took over Senafe and tried to move up to Adi Keih before an Eritrean counter attack forced the army back.

The airport in Asmara was bombed again, on the day the two sides sat down for cease fire talks in Algeria. A building and some fields were set ablaze, though none of the new Eritrean MiGs sitting on the runway were hit. This time the diplomats stayed put. There were fewer foreigners in Asmara, and luckily the bombing coincided with a public holiday in the United States so there was time for a more considered response. By that stage of the war most parts of Eritrea had been bombed at one time or another. Massawa had been hit, in fleeting raids. The new power station near Massawa was also badly damaged. Towns and villages mostly in western Eritrea had been hit, often repeatedly. In the town of Shambiko in western Eritrea, three hundred huts and buildings were destroyed in two days of raids in 1999. The Eritrean airforce had only a few new MiG 29 planes bought at very low, discount prices from Russian factories. Few in the Eritrean leadership considered air power to be a military factor, as it had not effected the outcome of the liberation war. But this war was not the war of liberation, and almost all soldiers I talked to wanted adequate missile defence against the planes and the helicopters which had proved so devastating against the Eritrean lines in the West.

The Aftermath

The cease fire was agreed in the middle of June. Fighting had continued along the Assab front, but the situation there had become more secure for the Eritrean army. In the west, the Eritrean army had launched a belated attack on the Ethiopian forces to retake Barentu. The Ethiopians were already preparing to leave and had looted much of the town. New buildings and hotels were then systematically blown up before the army pulled out. In the far west, along the border with Sudan, the town of Tessene changed hands four times during the course of the war. The Ethiopians finally pulled back

on the day of the cease-fire wrecking, burning and looting whatever they could. Interestingly, Ethiopian civilians were also bussed in from across the border in Tigray region to help in the looting, though it was never made clear how one got chosen to take part. There were risks - some Eritrean units were left behind to ambush convoys of looters leaving Tessenene.

"We wanted to desert, so we left our units", said three Ethiopian soldiers who sat by a wall in Tessenene. "Bullshit", said an old man, "they were drunk; I saw them, they were so drunk they did not hear the call to get into the trucks this morning. They only woke up when you came", he added, addressing an Eritrean officer. They were possibly the last prisoners of the war, and they were captured in Tessenene, sleeping off the last great piss-up, and getting left behind. The cease-fire had come into effect, but not before the Ethiopian army with the help of Ethiopian civilians had ransacked much of western Eritrea. The Ethiopians had only left Tessenene that morning. Driving into the town, we had been told that it was safe to go. But Eritrean mine-sweeping teams, armed with metal poles, were still at work poking the dirt tracks which were the roads in the town. A member of another de-mining team was being carried away on a stretcher as we pulled up at a hastily set up checkpoint. A tank with a mine clearing flail drove past heading out on the road we had just come down. The town was decimated. By the side of the street bits of furniture, corrugated iron, pots and pans were piled high. There had not been enough space on the departing Ethiopian trucks to take the final loot. But everything else had gone. Houses, hospitals, schools, the church, had all been completely looted, everything conceivable had been taken. The centre of the town had been torched, charred interiors, plastic ceiling fans warped by the heat. About sixty Eritreans, older men, had stayed behind during the occupation desperate to spare their shops from destruction. The rest of the sixty thousand population had fled across the nearby border with Sudan. Those who stayed said they had not been badly treated but would simply stay in their shop with the doors locked. If soldiers came, they would try persuade them not to take everything. Walking through the town was eerie. The doors to all houses, shops and buildings were forced open. It was tempting to peek inside. In the courtyard of several houses, cows, goats and other livestock had been shot. Their bloated carcasses swarmed with flies.

The next morning we drove out of the town towards what was going to be Eritrea's state-of-the-art cotton plantation and factory. The settlement outside the factory, which had been home to veterans of the liberation war, had been torched. The factory itself had been destroyed - used as target practice for rocket-propelled grenades. The empty crates for the RPGs were left strewn around. The cotton inside was burnt, and formed hot ash that was knee-deep. The trail of destruction was not confined to Tessenene: throughout the west, a similar price was paid.

The damage had been expected, and the towns regenerated remarkably quickly. But what I only saw later was the destruction of the Martyrs' cemeteries -

those for Eritreans who had died during the independence war. This really angered people. In a few towns under occupation, the graves were bulldozed, scattering the bones those of who had died during the wars, when Eritreans and Tigrayans had fought together as comrades.

Those who stayed during occupation were mostly women, children and the elderly. Often the local priest would stay to give what protection he could. Some women who were left in the towns under occupation were raped but getting accurate figures is difficult, not least because of social taboos. It did not appear systematic, and many women said they were safe enough if they stayed together.

The Eritrean opposition allied to the Ethiopian army also made appearances in some parts of Eritrea during the occupation. Locals said they had helped with medical supplies, but lost a lot of credibility for not stopping the looting.

On the whole, there was little reaction to the war ending. For most it was simply exhaustion and trying to repair the damage incurred over the two years. The government did not release the names of those who died until June 2003. It said people should celebrate the martyrs' sacrifice but for days Eritreans wept and mourned uncontrollably for those they had lost. The government said that 19,000 had died during the war, still a huge figure for a country the size of Eritrea, in such a short space of time. Some, though, think the real number is higher. Politically, disputes within the leadership became more public. The President was forced to agree to a timetable for elections by the group that had criticised Isaias for his conduct of the war. The newspapers became a forum for a debate on the state of the nation. Every subject was discussed, including allegations of rape and harassment within the Eritrean army, a subject previously untouchable. The United Nations peace-keepers started to arrive, disciplined at first, but as time went on many saw them as a corrupting influence in town. Prostitution increased, partly because of the UN and partly because the post-war economy was devastated. The Eritrean army was not demobilised, as the government said the war would not be officially over until the border had been demarcated. Increasingly young people wanted to leave the country, tired of never-ending national service with a salary officially valued at 15 dollars a month. The government further tightened already ferocious restrictions on travel abroad. In the aftermath of the September 11th attacks, while the world was looking the other way, the President moved against his critics. Those who had grouped together against the him in the final phase of the war were imprisoned, the newspapers were banned, independent journalists were arrested. They have been held incommunicado, none have faced trial. The promised elections and laws on political pluralism have been shelved. The President, Isaias Afewerki, said his

political opponents were defeatist and had collaborated with Ethiopia. In reality, their unified criticism of him towards the end of the war was, the President felt, a coup-in-waiting. His opponents within the leadership opted for reform of the system, instead of a coup, but in effect the challenge to the President's power was still real. Since the arrest of the leading figures, arrests have continued - the government says there are secret cells of opponents or traitors working inside the country.

Months after the war, flying over the country inside a UN helicopter I looked down and saw the trenches empty. They looked incredible, mile after mile, cutting across the landscape through hills and plains. I thought about the time the soldiers spent digging these engineering feats. I thought of my time spent sitting inside a dugout, musty with the dust, where I felt remarkably safe sipping tea and eating rock-hard bread. I thought back to my first months in Eritrea, the first trip to the little village of Badme, and looking down I saw the scale of the conflict's escalation. It had not been the glorious victory that people thought would again be achieved against all odds. There was some feeling of satisfaction when Eritrea was given Badme by the Boundary Commission, but little rejoicing. The war has changed far more than the border. It has of course affected Eritrea's politics, destroyed the economy and the country is no longer seen as a shining example for the new Africa. But perhaps the war's greatest legacy will not be seen until after demobilisation, when the new generation of Eritreans, whose lives were spent in those trenches, finally come home.